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ORAL READING IN ITS RELATION TO THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

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I begin with a truism. But since even the thing we call originality can consist only of little bundles of assorted truisms, I make no apology for my lack of it in saying that no work of literature can be wholly printed. The real message of the sermon can only be spoken; the eloquence of the oration does not exist on the printed page; the drama is speech; and the melody of poetry is called into being only by the living voice. The written word is a dead symbol that only the power of oral expression can give reality and life. Hence, the highest literature always implies vocal expression; and it is hardly too much to say that vocal interpretation is the necessary climax of any true study of any work of literature.

In considering the value of oral reading in the classroom study of a piece of literature, therefore, one is tempted to go far and to say that it is not valuable at all; it is invaluable. Indeed, one may go farther and ask, How is it possible to teach a piece of literature without oral reading—and a great deal of it? How is it possible that not only the climax, but much of the beginning and continuation of such study, should not be principally an effort to awaken vocally the thought and feeling that lie dormant on the printed page? Minute and careful elucidation of more or less obscure references may have an informational value; painstaking examination of human motive and consequence may nourish a budding analytical faculty; assiduous attention to rhetorical excellences and deficiencies may develop a critical attitude of mind; but since the purpose of the study of literature is culture rather than information, and appreciation rather than criticism, the desired result is not to be obtained by any such methods as these. Indeed, the result of any attempt to teach literature with

a minimum of oral reading can be only a minimum of success. The young student of literature should not be trained to be the critical scientist, looking coldly on from the outside; and literary surgical processes of dissection are not the best means of revealing the great truths of literature. Literature is art, not science; and as an art it must be translated. Vocal interpretation is also an art, not a science, and is the best proof that the interpreter has identified himself with the truth. In the endeavor to voice the thoughts, the emotions of the masterpiece, it becomes clear whether the truth has entered into his being. Oral reading is the revelation of the reader. The touch given to certain words; the grouping of words in thought-phrases; the pause; the modulations of tone expressing—or struggling to express—one emotion or another, will be the measure of his understanding and appreciation. How he thinks the thought; his realization of the idea; the response awakened in him—all will be manifest in his manner of pronouncing the words. His utterance is a language in itself, personal, subjective, emotional, free, spontaneous.

But, unfortunately, there is too often painful proof that no such sympathetic relation has been established between the reader and the thing read. The schoolroom offers no more nerve-racking performance than that of the student laboring dully and monotonously to read a passage that conveys to him no thought-message and awakens in him no spark of sympathetic emotion. It is a desecration of a noble work of art. The temptation of the teacher at such trying times is to assume the office of reader. It is a good thing to do, and a thing that the teacher of literature should be amply qualified to do. The ability to read effectively, to read with sympathy, earnestness, and seriousness, is a valuable and necessary asset of one who deals with classics. The teacher of English who is master of the principles and practice of the best pedagogy, but who lacks the ability to read well, can no more be a wholly good teacher of literature than a fine, sympathetic reader whose pedagogy is more or less at loose ends can be a wholly bad one. There is inspiration for the dullest class in the reading that is natural and forcible because it is in harmony with the truth. It stimulates thought, stirs emotion, quickens imagination, and

is a revelation of things hitherto unknown and undreamed of. It meets the response of an unawakened admiration and new valuation of the particular piece of literature under consideration. It is, in short, a pleasant and easy way to present a classic and to effect certain results. But the limit of its usefulness is soon reached; and, since it suggests but does not develop, it is not the best way to achieve the highest good of the student. Objective methods can do little toward transforming a bad reader into a good one. Imitation at best is the poorest and least intelligent of arts. It seizes accidentals and utterly ignores all that is fundamental; and oral reading developed by attention to accidentals can only be superficial, artificial, and unnatural. Imitation is not expression; it is mere sight at second hand and a poor substitute for the reader's own vision. Expression is subjective. Oral reading is from within, not without; and improvement in reading is an indication that some vital thought process has begun. Mechanical rules are a hindrance to both thought and feeling; and artificial helps can never supply the want of personal realization of a passage. Indeed, so dependent is good reading upon good thinking that oral reading is, in a sense, a process of thinking aloud.

The first test of good reading is simple truthfulness. Is it genuine? Is it natural? For fine reading is as bad as fine writing, if not worse. And the first step toward good reading is careful preparation of the passage to be read. There is no such thing possible as reading at sight. The most finished professional reader would not risk his reputation by appearing before an audience without thorough preparation. How manifestly absurd, then, to require a young student to feel his way through an unknown passage and to interpret vocally a thought that he has had no opportunity to grasp. Intelligent interpretation must be preceded by meditation; the passage to be read must be studied before it can be voiced. The effect of this close attention will be that the mind, concentrated upon a central idea, will gather into a group the words belonging to that idea; and the further result will be the utterance of thought-phrases, instead of the monotonous, disconnected string of words that characterizes poor reading. Not less important than this thought-phrasing, and growing out

of it, is pause, one of the supreme difficulties in reading. That pause is not a mere mechanical halt of the voice, determined by the end of the line in poetry, by punctuation, or the mechanism of grammar or rhetoric; that its purpose is anything more than a much-needed opportunity to breathe, is not always clear to the young reader. The idea of pause as a necessary part of the thought, as an accentuation of the thought, as a silence filled with significance, as a time to reflect upon what is past and to prepare for what is to come, must be a gradual realization; but when the poorest reader comes to realize the value and significance of pause, there cannot fail to be a marked improvement in his reading. The same insight that develops phrasing and pause will develop emphasis, the location of the center of the idea, along with them. These things are not independent; they are parts of what may be called the unity of expression. Correctly placed emphasis reveals not only a command of the words, but control of feeling and concentration of thought as well. Its alternation with pause is the direct effect of a rhythmic action of the mind in thinking; and in proportion as thinking is genuine and expression natural will be the regular rhythmic alternation of pause and touch in reading. Such things as these are fundamental, and it is only by the accentuating of fundamentals that naturalness and power can be acquired. It is the business of the teacher to distinguish and develop what is primary and essential so that improvement may be real and permanent rather than apparent and fleeting. It is unnecessary to add that careful pronunciation and enunciation must be constantly insisted upon.

This much, then, should be the business of the teacher of English. Anything more technical, any drill must belong to the regular class in oral expression. And right here, may I make bold to say that oral expression classes seem not infrequently to present a sort of paradox? Is it not more often than otherwise the student who already reads with intelligence who elects to perfect himself in vocal interpretation? And should not these classes be designed primarily for those to whom oral expression does not come readily? I am merely inquiring. A required course of two hours of oral expression throughout the first year of

high-school work would undoubtedly prove of inestimable value to the work of the English classroom.

Is it, then, intended to suggest that the oral reading of a classic should wholly supersede question and discussion? By no means. These things are undoubtedly the best of preparation for the oral interpretation to follow. The skilful questioning of the teacher clarifies thought and prepares the way for intelligent reading; but in proportion as reading becomes more and more intelligent will the necessity for a certain kind of questioning be less and less. Moreover, the conversational freedom and spontaneity of classroom discussion are a distinct help toward the attainment of ease and naturalness in reading. The trouble with most reading is that it dissociates itself entirely from any relation with conversation, whereas it is precisely the same spontaneous thinking that makes both intelligent. Neither is it intended to suggest that many of the longer classics can be read orally in the classroom in their entirety. Assignments should be definite. Students should know that they will be required to express vocally any one of a certain number of passages; or specific passages may be assigned to certain students; or a student may be permitted to make his own choice of a passage because of some quality in it that particularly appeals to him and prompts him to utterance. But whatever the plan pursued, there must be insistence on careful preparation, and every student must from time to time have opportunity to read. By following some such plan, real interest is stimulated in the act itself, and a certain pride of utterance springs into being. The oral reading of a classic should become a joy; if it does not, one may be almost certain that the classic itself gives no joy.

Some of us recall Dr. Spaeth's story of the Princeton freshman who, when asked what he understood by a classic, replied that a classic is a piece of literature written in a dead language. The answer is not without suggestion. Greek and Latin are not always the dead languages. It is safe to say that any classic studied without the vocal interpretation that is the final test of all literary appreciation must become to the young student a piece of literature written in a dead language.